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ABSTRACT

A 10-year survey of 360 graduates (1979-1989) of an educational psychology and counseling program at a midwestern university was conducted. Of the 138 respondents, 94 had earned their master's degree, 4 had earned the educational specialist degree, and 40 had earned their doctorates. The findings revealed that trends in first employment positions in school counseling remained fairly stable, with approximately 30% of the graduates beginning their careers in school counseling. Postsecondary placements gradually declined over the decade, from 23% to 12%; clinical positions more than doubled to a 1989 level of nearly 42%; positions in human service agencies peaked early in the 1980s but ended in 1989 at about the 12% level; and percentages of those beginning their careers in private practice/consulting remained quite low (4-8%) across all time periods with no clear trends being established. Respondents were asked to put in rank order aspects of the program as to their meaningfulness, with the result that the practica/internship experience moved from third place in 1979 to first place by 1989. Coursework/curriculum showed a steady decline from first to third position. Over the decade, interaction with faculty was most frequently ranked as the most meaningful aspect of the program, while interaction with other students and research were ranked as the least meaningful aspects of the program. (NB)

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Trends in Meaning and Meaningful Trends:

A Survey of Counseling Graduates

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Running head: TRENDS

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Abstract

In preparing for a CACREP self study, a ten-year survey of graduates (1979-89) of an educational psychology and counseling program at an average-sized, mid-western university was completed in the fall of 1989. An approximate 40% return of 342 questionnaires was analyzed to portray both the career tendencies and the reported meaningful aspects of the training program for both master's and doctoral-level graduates. The study combined both quantitative and qualitative data in an abbreviated two-page format that aided in program assessment and planning efforts, and allowed for a projection of future needs based upon the charted trends.

Trends in Meaning and Meaningful Trends:

A Survey of Counseling Graduates

When the overall process of accreditation was examined for its worth and value (Stickle & Schnacke, 1984), the response of CACREP-accredited programs was overwhelmingly "yes", it was worthwhile because "the process of self-evaluation led to positive outcomes for the programs" (p. 195). Despite this laudatory conclusion, Engels and Wilborn (1984) note that the instruments used for student follow-up are limited in number and difficult to find, that there is a paucity of regular published evaluations of graduates, and that many counselor education programs do not have adequate information on which to base curriculum, program, and accountability decisions. They go on to address these issues by offering a seven-page evaluative instrument (Engels & Wilborn, 1984). While their efforts were quite thorough, they seem also to compound the problem of the protracted number of person hours required to complete the task (Stickle & Schnacke, 1984).

The survey of graduates here reported is drawn from an average-sized, by the criterion of White (1985), rural, mid-western counselor education program housed in a division of educational psychology and counseling. In was conducted with the active involvement of students in the local chapter of Chi Sigma Iota, the counseling honor society. The immediate relevance of the study

concerned its inclusion in a preparatory self study for the Council on Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and the North Central Association (NCA) accreditation purposes. The broader relevance for the profession seems to lie in two areas: 1) it investigates graduates' perceptions over a ten-year period of the meaningfulness of the different elements in counselor preparation; and 2) it combines both quantitative and qualitative data in an abbreviated two-page format which addresses the issue of the protracted time involved. Concerning the first point, it should be noted that an ERIC search for the past 14 years with the descriptors of "counselor education" and "meaning", or "meaningfulness", revealed no pertinent records.

Method

Instrument

The questionnaire was designed to address two main objectives: 1) refinement in program objectives in light of the experience and suggestions provided by program graduates; and 2) assessment of initial employment opportunities to discern possible trends over the decade. In line with these purposes, the following items were included: 1) demographics --- name (designated as optional), year graduated degree, area of concentration; 2) employment history; 3) quality of educational preparation for each position listed;

4) whether professional licensing or certification examinations were required (if yes, a rating scale was provided to assess how well their education prepared them); 5) degree of satisfaction with their program of study; 6) a rank ordering of how meaningful for their professional development were the following elements of their training: practica/internship, research, interaction with faculty, interaction with peers, curriculum, and "other", to be specified; and 7) recommendations for modification of program content and objectives, as well as any desired comments.

Of the above items, a five-point likert scale was used for numbers #3, #4, and #5. Item #7 was asked in the form of an open-ended question. With the concern of addressing the follow-up issues in the CACREP self-study document while minimizing length, the two-page design, requiring about ten minutes to complete, was viewed as meeting this need.

Participants

The questionnaires were mailed during the fall of 1989 to the total number of graduates (n=360) from 1979-1989, who met the criteria of successfully completing a M.A., Ed.S., or Ed.D. degree in the division. One follow-up request was made to those not responding to the first mailing after four weeks. Eighteen of the questionnaires were returned with no forwarding address, which left a revised total of 342. The total number of respondents was 144, however, 6 were

deleted as illegible or incomplete, leaving a return of 138, or 40% of the revised total. While beneficial information for evaluation and planning was derived from this number of respondents, and there is no reason to believe that it is not representative, it did raise questions which are being pursued as to the profile of those that failed to respond.

Of the total respondents, 94 (68%) had earned the master's degree, 4 (3%) earned the educational specialist degree, and 40 (29%) earned the doctorate. Further, 7 (5%) of the total respondents were identified as School or Educational Psychologists, which leaves 131 (95%) as products of the counseling program.

Results and Discussion

Trends in First Positions

In an effort to establish career tendencies of the graduates, all data obtained were grouped and analyzed according to four established time periods: 1979-81, 1982-84, 1985-87, and 1988-89. Five first position categories were identified: School (k-12), Post-secondary education, Clinical, Human Services, and Private practice/consulting. The trends are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

First employment positions in school counseling has remained fairly stable, around 30% of the graduates over the decade. Post-secondary placements, most typical of the student personnel specialty area, has shown a gradual decline over the decade, from an approximate a 23% level to an approximate 12% level. Clinical positions have more than doubled over the time period examined to a current level of nearly 42%. Positions in human service agencies peaked early in the decade but ended at the level of positions in student personnel. Percentages of those with first employment in private practice/consulting have remained quite low, (4 to 8%) across all time periods with no clear trends being established. The trend toward the increasing frequency of first employment in clinical community settings is consistent with national trends (Hollis & Wantz, 1986; West, Hosie, & Mackey, 1987).

Meaningfulness of Program Components

The other primary area examined in the questionnaire asked the respondents to rank order the aspects of the program as to their meaningfulness. The rankings are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The practica/internship experience was elevated from an intial third place ranking

to the top ranking among the most recent graduates. This finding is consistent with anecdotal feedback from students indicating a clear practitioner orientation in all areas, but particularly at the master's level. At the same time, coursework/curriculum showed a steady drop from a first to a third ranking at the end of the decade. In part, this may reflect the forced suppression due to the increased importance given to practica and internship.

Interaction with faculty was most frequently ranked by the respondents as the most meaningful aspect of the program. This finding was not unanticipated given both the constancy of the faculty over this period and their expressed priority of accessibility to students. Further, interaction with faculty often provides a feedback experience for student practice in counseling and for clarification of individual counseling style. It therefore seems directly related to the top priority item. Regardless, the finding does serve to validate the program's emphasis in this area.

The least meaningful aspects reflected in the survey were interaction with other students and research. Other than the outcome being a function of the higher ranking given to the "hands-on" experiences of practica and internship, research and interaction with peers are typically viewed as supportive areas, and thus less directly meaningful. Relative to the low ranking of research, it should be noted that the non-thesis track at the master's level was chosen by the large

majority of students over the past ten years.

Evaluation of the qualitative data served to both clarify and to provide further elaboration. For example, over all time periods the surveyed respondents emphasized increasing both the quantity and quality of the practica and internship experiences. Specifically, suggestions called for increased exposure to a wider variety of counseling styles, and greater opportunity for observation and shadowing of professionals in various settings. Concerning curricular changes, specific recommendations were for additional course work and outreach offerings in group counseling, chemical dependency, abuse and violence, and clinical assessment. Only three comments (2%) were made concerning the program's research component, and no comments were offered that directly addressed the component of interaction with students. However, several graduates expressed interest in maintaining better ties to the program through a "graduate newsletter". This is now being developed, partially in response to the survey.

Conclusion

The information gathered by way of this brief survey was indeed of value. Expansion of curricular offerings in line with the findings is already under way. The modification of objectives is in process, as is development of a newsletter for graduates, which will hopefully allow for opening of contact with the

numerous graduates who failed to respond to the survey, as well as facilitate increased regularity of input from all former graduates. Some further implications of the survey include: the need to discern the migration trends of graduates to urban and other areas of the country, need for profiles of persons who started and then dropped the program prior to graduation, and the need to develope profiles of non-respondents.

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TABLE 1
Trends in Employment

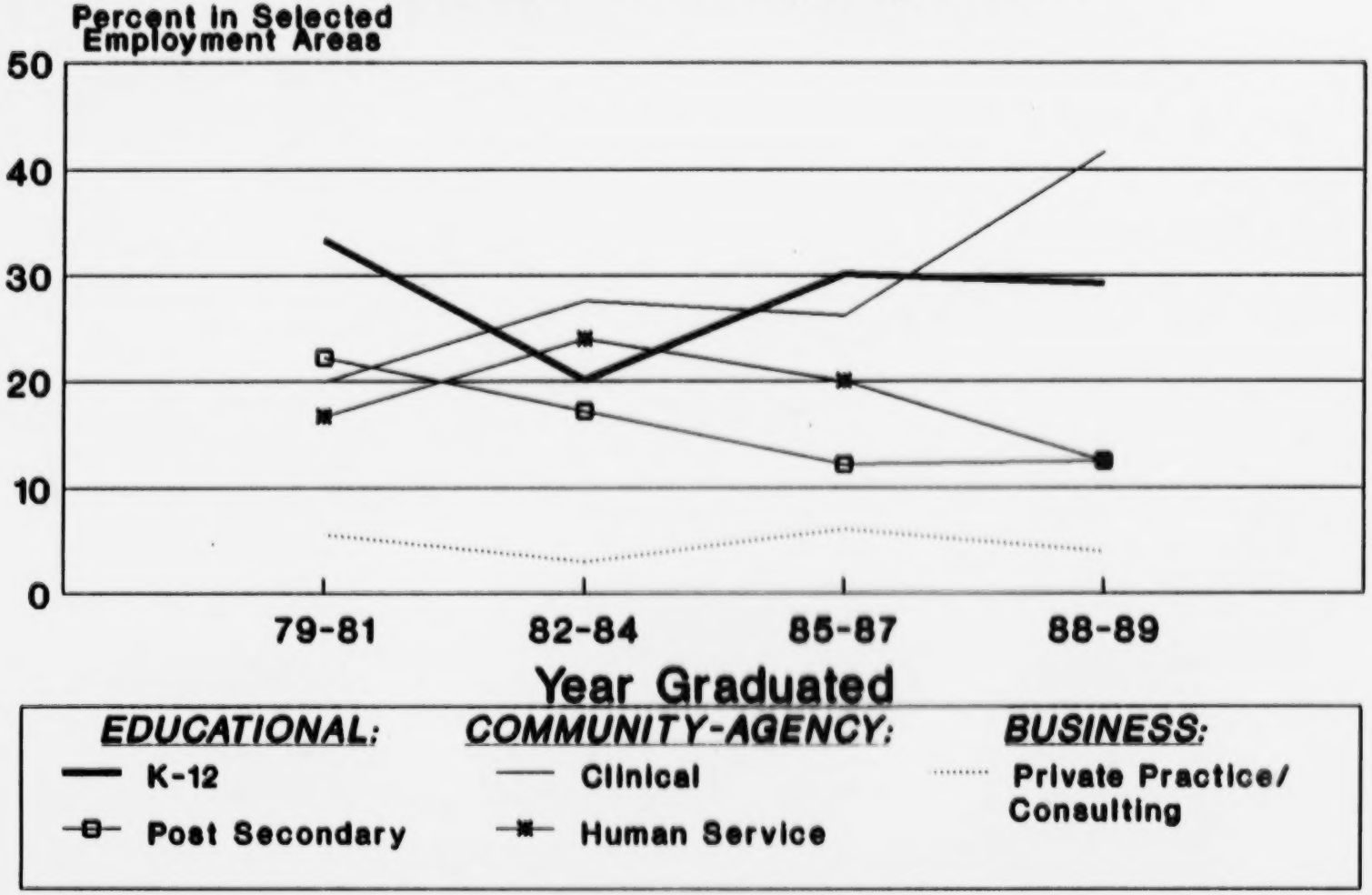

TABLE 2

Meaningfulness of Aspects of Program Rank-Ordered According to Time Periods

1 = Most meaningful
6 = Least meaningful

1979-81
(N = 36)

Coursework	(2.21)
Interaction faculty	(2.31)
Pract./Internship	(2.58)
Interaction students	(3.14)
Research	(4.47)
Other	(5.33)

1982-84
(N = 29)

Interaction faculty	(2.04)
Coursework	(2.44)
Pract./Internship	(2.50)
Interaction students	(3.43)
Research	(3.79)
Other	(4.20)

1985-87
(N = 49)

Interaction faculty	(2.48)
Pract./Internship	(2.51)
Coursework	(2.55)
Interaction students	(3.11)
Research	(3.72)
Other	(5.50)

1988-89
(N = 24)

Pract./Internship	(1.96)
Interaction faculty	(2.72)
Coursework	(2.79)
Other	(3.29)
Interaction students	(3.60)
Research	(4.57)